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ABSTRACT

The National Adult LIteracy Survey was a nationwide survey of a random sample of approximately 26,000 adults. The survey collected information about individuals' social, economic, and educational histories and their literacy activities. Their functional literacy was also assessed using simulated functional or real-world tasks designed to determine the ability to process information in prose, document, and quantitative tasks. Findings included the following: (1) nearly half of those surveyed were found to perform at the two lowest levels of reading proficiency; (2) literacy proficiencies were found to be closely correlated to such indicators as wages, earnings, and poverty status; (3) 75-80% of Black adults were at the two lowest levels, compared to 38-43% of White adults; (4) at constant levels of education, Whites earn significantly more than Blacks; and (5) after taking educational attainment into account, wages and earnings are positively related to functional literacy. In other words, the study concluded that there is no difference between Blacks and Whites when both education and literacy are equated. Findings suggest the importance of the following: a broadened approach to educational equity, especially functional literacy; access to literacy learning in all contexts; and incorporation of these concerns into the new standards movement. (SK)

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NALS Raises Vital Equity Issues

By STEPHEN REDER

This article is a summary of Stephen Reder's panel presentation at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Twenty-third Annual Legislative Weekend. The panel, chaired by the Hon. Donald M. Payne of New Jersey, was convened on September 16, 1993 in Washington, DC.

The recently released National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), reporting data collected in 1992 by the National Center for Education Statistics, represents the most comprehensive assessment in decades of adults' literacy capabilities and needs. The survey involved a random sample of about 26,000 of the nation's adult population (age 16 and over).

The NALS survey, conducted in homes, included an interview to obtain information about individuals' social, economic, and educational histories and status as well as their literacy activities. It also included an assessment of their functional literacy capabilities. The assessment consisted of simulated functional or real-world tasks, like filling in a form, extracting information from a chart, and looking through a newspaper article for needed information. These items, which ranged in format, complexity, and difficulty, were designed to assess individuals' abilities to process information in prose, document, and quantitative tasks. Numerical proficiency scores were estimated for each individual's prose, document, and quantitative literacy abilities based on the tasks that they were able to perform correctly. These scores range from 0-500 on each scale and were categorized at one of five general levels of proficiency. According to the NALS report, individuals at the two lowest proficiency levels are able to perform a limited range of relatively simple tasks; but individuals functioning at these levels have substantial difficulties performing more challenging literacy tasks, particularly those requiring higher level reading and problem-solving skills.

These results suggest that we may need to rethink and broaden our approach to educational equity.

Results of the NALS

The results of the NALS are striking. Nearly half of the nation's adults, 16 years and older, perform at the two lowest levels of proficiency. The NALS report demonstrates that the literacy proficiencies measured by this assessment are closely related to indicators of the social and economic well-being of individuals and families, such as

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labor force participation, income level, poverty status, involvement with the criminal justice system, and voting activity.

As important as these findings are regarding the nation as a whole, the data regarding Blacks need to be highlighted. The NALS reports that 75-80% of Black adults in the United States are functioning at the two lowest proficiency levels, compared to 38-43% of White adults. Correspondingly higher concentrations of non-employment, low income, poverty, welfare utilization, and incarceration are found among Black adults in these data as well.

Education and Literacy

Education has long been the primary means by which literacy skills have been taught and learned in our society. Analysis of the NALS data indicates that educational attainment is the strongest determinant of proficiency, for both Whites and Blacks. The more schooling individuals have, the higher their

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performance on these assessments. But there is, nonetheless, a striking gap between Blacks' and Whites' functional literacy capabilities at each level of educational attainment, from less than high school up through postbaccalaureate degrees. On all three literacy scales, for example, the average score for Blacks who have completed a four-year college degree is about the same as that for Whites who have completed only a high school degree.

Education, Literacy, and Economic Outcomes

Being fully cognizant of the many important issues and questions involved in interpreting such performance differences on standardized tests like this one, there are, nevertheless, important reasons not to dismiss these data. When we look at economic outcomes, such as wages,

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earnings, and poverty status, we find strong positive correlations between educational attainment and economic outcomes. But even after we take educational attainment into account, there are major gaps between the earnings of Blacks and Whites. At constant levels of education, Whites earn significantly more than Blacks. These relationships are well-established in a variety of studies and data sources.

But our analysis of statewide adult literacy surveys in Oregon and Mississippi and a national survey of clients in U.S. Department of Labor programs (which used instrumentation very similar to NALS) adds a vital piece of information: Wages and earnings are positively related to functional literacy (as measured by these instruments) even when educational attainment is held constant. The labor market is rewarding the skills and knowledge tapped by the NALS test, even after educational attainment (and other background variables) are taken into account. Indeed, the wage gap between Blacks and Whites disappears when the effects of both education and literacy are held constant.

It is important that this point be made clear. When predicting average wage or personal income with multiple regression techniques, there is no difference between Blacks and Whites when both education and literacy are equated. Therein lies both the good and bad news. The good news is that, possibly, if the gap were closed between Blacks' and Whites' functional literacy capabilities (as measured by this test), economic gaps might close as well. The bad news, of course, is that there are major literacy differences between Blacks and Whites at each level of educational attainment. Furthermore, there is little indication in these data that the disparity between Blacks' and Whites' literacy skills at given levels of education is diminishing over time, even as the gaps in educational attainment are closing between Whites and Blacks.

A New Strategy for Equity

These results suggest that we may need to rethink and broaden our approach to educational equity. In recent decades, the equity emphasis has been on expanding and equalizing access to education. We have worked hard at increasing access to

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schooling. This valiant effort has paid off well for many children. Gaps in educational attainment have significantly narrowed. The assumption behind this work has been that educational attainment leads to functional competence which in turn leads to economic and social rewards.

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But our analysis of the NALS data indicates that this equity of access to schooling, although clearly necessary, may not be sufficient. We must attend to equity in the outcomes of schooling, especially functional literacy with its attendant social and economic byproducts. An expanded and equitable access to literacy learning is required.

What To Do

How can we promote equity of access to literacy learning in order to ensure that our children not only attain the schooling and degrees they desire, but also the functional literacy capabilities valued in society's labor market and essential for our collective social and economic well-being? Three general directions are suggested for policy and program development. All may require new ways of doing business in schools.

Three general directions are suggested for policy and program development. All may require new ways of doing business in schools.

First, we must support equity in functional literacy outcomes—not just equity in the amount of seat-time or degrees obtained. Equity of literacy outcomes must become a policy and programmatic goal in itself, and a criterion for excellence in education.

Second, we must promote access to literacy learning in all of its contexts, including but not limited to schools. There is growing evidence that literacy is learned in both schools and many nonschool settings, including the home, the community, and the workplace. Opportunities for learning must be accessible and rewarding across the lifespan. Programmatic efforts must engage and serve not only schoolchildren but also the many millions of adults needing better functional capabilities.

Third, we must assure that the new standards movement incorporates the above concerns. The issue here is not so much whether there should be reform and new standards, but making sure that such sweeping changes are designed to promote equity in access to learning and in outcomes. Our analyses suggest that minority children and families may face new inequities if traditional educational standards such as a high school diploma are replaced by performance thresholds on functional literacy tests like the NALS.

These are three directions in which policy and programs should evolve as we reform our schools and restructure opportunities for literacy learning that lead to equitable social and economic rewards. Filling in the many necessary details of design and implementation will take years of hard work. But such reform is possible if we proceed from a clear vision of not only what we want our children to know, but also of what kind of world we want them to live in. Excellence and equity in adult literacy must grow hand in hand. ■